FORUM Aug 16 1995 G.T.

Gays, lesbians suffer the stigma of distorted stereotypes

By **Bill and Pat Pfeiffer**

PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) commends the Gazette Telegraph for bringing about a dialogue between opposing factions in this city. It is our hope that a sense of community can be restored through thoughtful discussion and education.

As parents of both straight and gay children, we stand with one foot in the heterosexual community and one in the gay community. A large part of our mission is to build bridges of understanding between the two.

PFLAG is a grass-roots organization with 359 chapters worldwide. The Colorado Springs chapter was formed 3½ years ago. Today, in the aftermath of Amendment 2, there are 150 members. We are committed to helping families with gay, lesbian and bisexual members cope with an adverse society. In addition, we reach out to the community with up-to-date, valid information about homosexuality. Our speakers' bureau offers an alternative voice to those strident voices in our community who foster prejudice and irrational fear.

As members of PFLAG we would like to respond to those who proclaim that homosexuality is not morally or ethically equal to heterosexuality. Such unjust condemnation is damaging to families and creates a climate of disrespect that poisons the entire community. Thousands of PFLAG families across the country will vouch for the fact that their gay and lesbian children are just as moral and ethical, just as responsible, hard-working and productive as their straight brothers and sisters.

Young gays and lesbians particularly suffer from the constant drumbeat of distorted and negative stereotypes about homosexuality. At an age when they are desperately seeking factual knowledge about their own sexual orientation, they meet with a wall of silence and/or censure. Nowhere do they learn that they can claim a proud heritage. Some of history's most creative, influential and inspiring human beings were gay.

Lillian Smith, the civil rights activist of the 1940s, said, "A child's personality cannot grow without self-esteem, without feelings of emotional security, without faith in the world's willingness to make room for him (or her) to live as a human being." To deny gay adolescents those fundamental human needs is to put them at grave risk of alienation, depression and a high rate of suicide, according to the American Medical Association's Report on Health Care Needs of Gay Men and Lesbians, 1994.

Imagine, if you can, your high school teen-ager coming home from school one day and telling you he or she is gay. How would you react? Most parents are woefully uninformed about homosexuality and may be ill-equipped to deal with the shock of a son or daughter coming out. PFLAG meetings provide a confidential setting where they will find support and advice from other parents who have walked the same path. A wealth of educational material will guide them away from stereotypes and half-truths. Recent reports from the AMA and other professional organizations reassure parents that homosexuality is not a sickness, an addiction or a perversion, as sometimes is charged by the more extreme elements of our society. Moreover, current research seems to support what PFLAG families have known all along — that sexual orientation is innate.

Bob Berstein summed up PFLAG's family values in his excellent book, "Straight Parents, Gay Children: Keeping Families Together": "It's looking beyond the stereotypes, beyond the fears, beyond all the untruths that are out there, beyond fears about what others might think, and acting on your true love of your child, on those instincts that tell you, 'My child is a decent human being.' "

Listening, learning and loving are the principles that have guided us in building bridges of understanding within our own diverse families. Out of those ties, some valuable insights have evolved. We mention a few here:

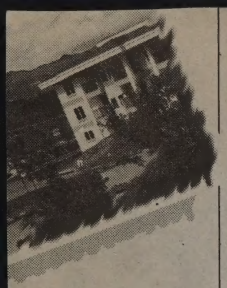
- We value our gay children just as they are. Under no circumstances would we subject them to "change" therapy, a dubious practice that the American Psychological Association states may do more harm than good.
- Sexuality is a gift to be used responsibly by all persons.
- Homosexual behavior does not equate with sin.
- We honor the commitments of our gay family members and accept their life partners in our families.
- We do not want "special rights" for our gay loved ones. We only want for them to have the same respect and rights that our heterosexual children enjoy.

Each family's journey to understanding and acceptance is unique, but all journeys are rich with the unfolding of new horizons and new truths. We have watched love work its magic in dissipating fear, in transcending differences of opinion and in reforming hardened attitudes toward people perceived to be different.

Love frees people to be who God intended them to be; it gives courage to those who suffer prejudice and imparts hope to those who suffer inequities. No orchestrated attacks of discrimination can destroy love. It survives in the darkest of days, carried from heart to heart and person to person.

This simple faith sustains PFLAG's resolve to continue building bridges between the straight and gay communities. We hope it will lead other individuals to take a first step in crossing the chasm of misunderstanding that separates us.

The Pfeiffers serve on the board of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays in Colorado Springs. Forum is open to readers who have expertise or personal experience in an area of public policy. Articles should be about 750 words in length and can be sent to: GT Forum, Gazette Telegraph, P.O. Box 1779, Colorado Springs, CO 80901.



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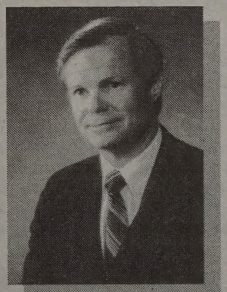

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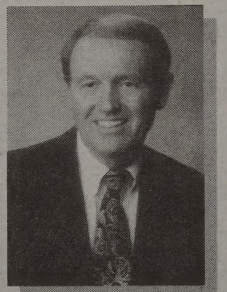

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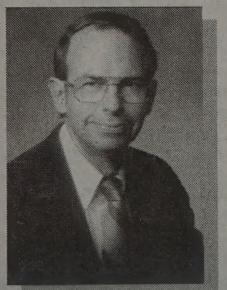

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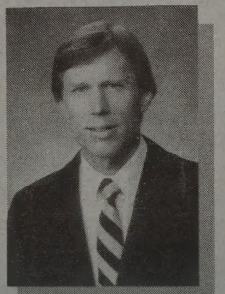

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